



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Continuing Repression in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 19, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Paragraph One of the 1990 Copenhagen Document states: "The participating States express their conviction that the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms is one of the basic purposes of government."

Sadly, continuing -- even intensifying -- repression in Belarus indicates that the Belarusian Government does not share that conviction.

President Lukashenko's appointment of Viktor Sheiman as head of the Presidential Administration on November 29, 2004, despite credible evidence linking Sheiman to the disappearances of opposition figures and a journalist in 1999 and 2000, raises the question as to whether these crimes will ever be fully investigated.

The list of incidents of harassment and persecution of independent civil society in Belarus has grown substantially since the United States and other delegations addressed the fraudulent Belarusian parliamentary elections and referendum abolishing presidential term limits in the Permanent Council on October 21, 2004.

The politically motivated trial against opposition figure Michael Marinich, as well as the disproportionate sentencing he received, is a recent, prominent example.

Another notable example of the Government of Belarus' unwillingness to promote human rights is the recent refusal to grant the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Belarus a visa to conduct an in-country assessment.

Mr. Chairman, the United States is deeply concerned about a potential looming threat to independent NGOs and pro-democracy political parties in Belarus.

It is our understanding that the Belarusian Justice Ministry has informed such groups that, in order to conform with a legal requirement, they must find offices by February 1st that are located in either stand-alone buildings or have their own separate, exterior entrances.

Because the state controls Belarus' real estate sector and usually refuses to lease property to independent NGOs and democratic political parties, these organizations are forced to have their offices in apartments. As a result, most will not be able to meet this new, unreasonable legal requirement and could face punitive action.

This is yet another example of the Government of Belarus enacting and implementing legislation and regulations to stifle and, when it desires, stamp out independent civil society.

Even if they are able to find new, legally compliant offices, relevant civil society groups will then face the virtually impossible task of legally registering at new addresses. This is yet another cumbersome process regularly exploited by the Belarusian Government to harass and shut down groups that it deems undesirable.

In light of a variety of OSCE commitments to ensure the right of association and even facilitate NGO activities, especially in the area of human rights, we call on Belarusian authorities to desist from taking further repressive action against independent civil society.

We further call on the Government of Belarus, in consultation with the OSCE Office in Minsk, to begin devising a transparent regulatory code governing NGO and political party activities that promotes fulfillment of OSCE principles and enables such groups to thrive.

In addition, the United States draws attention to the mandate of the Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk to monitor and report on the development of the Belarusian government's relationship with civil society.

We call on the Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk to urgently investigate the Belarusian Justice Ministry's reported instruction to independent NGOs and pro-democracy political parties to find new offices.

We urge the Head of Office to keep the Permanent Council apprised of any development impeding the activities of such groups.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.